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## Feminist Curating: What it means and why it matters

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***Feminist Curating: What it means and why it matters\****

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## Introduction

This article outlines a proactive feminist curatorial methodology to encourage feminist curated exhibitions leading to greater recognition for under and misrepresented artists and impacting statistics of representation.

My examination targets exhibitions' feminist curatorial features and curator thought, focusing on women and feminist art due to the underrepresentation of their work in general. In this article, the definition of feminist curating includes gender identity, race, class, ability, age, and so on regardless of gender. Exhibitions in the study, are by necessity in Western Europe and Northern America, due to my location, language and resources. Since the start of second wave feminism in the 1970s, significant feminist research has investigated art history and recorded women artists' contributions, focusing on under-representation in museums, galleries and texts. However, [recent statistics](#) suggest the research, albeit pertinent, did not result in statistical equality in exhibitions, art sales or art collections. [When women artists gain exposure with exhibitions, displays often situate their work in relation to that of male artists](#). This article addresses a gap in research of the feminist art movement and the functions within curatorial practice. Understanding how exhibits are presented and interpreted will offer a curatorial approach to encourage recognition over marginalization, enabling movement toward an inclusive presence in mainstream art museums, collections and sales.

Though there has been a surge of "feminist exhibitions" in mainstream museums, feminism tends to be a misunderstood buzzword. This article argues that

exhibitions must go beyond consciousness-raising and move toward critical feminist curatorial practice. Sympathetic critiques of feminist exhibitions suggest that there is a need for curatorial self-reflexivity. *If feminist intention is overlooked in curatorial processes, underrepresented artists are in danger of being where they started:* objectified, in the margins of collections, sales and art history. This article reviews the literature around feminist curating, and outlines the following curatorial considerations: curating collaboratively; community involvement; research and strategic selection; positioning and assembling of the work encouraging interaction and contextual introspection; researching and writing the exhibition text including the acknowledgement of institutional limitations; and acknowledging feminist impact or gendered associations (as opposed to leaving it out); and providing accessibility.

### **Recent Feminist Art Movement/Curating Context**

To place this conversation in context, I review the current feminist art situation. Museum collections are based on art history and the emergence of “great artists.” An investigation into acquisitions reveals dependence, determining value, space and significance given by museums to underrepresented artists. Art history texts determine the artists featured and collected by museums and play a role in temporary exhibitions, education, publications, curricula and scholarship (Iskin 2016, 16).

Women are underrepresented in art history texts and museum collections. Feminist art historians research the lives and work of women artists, providing evidence contradicting dominant art history. Many women found in the records of time periods and styles are presented as counterparts to men, prompting a reexamination

of art history's methodology. Analyzing the gendered relations between the subject-in-representation and that of the artist and/or viewer emerged as a new dominant story (Deepwell 2006, 67-68).

Ideological effects of separating fine art from women's work date to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Because of the alignment of women artists with gender and rarely with quality, except "feminine" or "other", this effect continues (Parker and Pollock 1981, 1-49). Thus, authentic work still did not result in the critical recognition except in outlier cases such as Frida Kahlo (such examples have been criticized for fetishization with femininity instead of on her abilities).

Artists working as exhibition organizers and curators trended in the 1970s (Deepwell 2006, 77-78). For example, Adrian Piper explored context, prominently with [\*Aspects of the Liberal Dilemma\*](#) (1978) and Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's [\*Womanhouse\*](#) (1972). Many exhibitions aligned women with new media as a feminist avante garde, such as photography, performance, video and installation.

Installation art has minimalist precursors, though feminist art comes with an additional intent for enrichment or understanding outside the gallery. Feminist artists of the 1970s formulated new curatorial strategies, aiming to enter institutions on par with men; reforming a more inclusive art world; and organizing completely alternative feminist structures, reconfiguring the relationship between artists and curators (Robinson 2013, 137).

Dimitrakaki and Perry point out that though the “feminist art movement has challenged curatorial conventions from the beginning...Feminist literature from the 1970s to the late 1980s makes frequent references to the need for co-ordinated, strategic action against the gendered hierarchies defining the contexts where art and its publics met” (Dimitrakaki and Perry 2013, 3) indicating a need for feminist curatorial scholarship. Edited volumes tackling these issues include *Curating Differently: Feminisms, Exhibitions and Curatorial Spaces* (Skrubbe 2016) and *Re-Envisioning the Contemporary Art Canon: Perspectives in a Global World* (Iskin 2016).

A parallel critique around exhibitions including only women challenges large survey shows of women artists as not reinforcing of feminine stereotypes (Deepwell 2006, 78). De Zegher developed a framework that avoided fixed constructs while conveying meaning and acknowledging women’s individuality, avoiding the mark of “the other” that promotes a singular model of art history (Deepwell 2006, 74).

The 2000s had an influx of feminist and/or women-themed exhibitions in major institutions. Robinson looks at several that differ in curatorial technique and art, stressing the importance of examining such survey exhibitions closely for a “deep, political, change in approaches to the collection and curation of contemporary art in these institutions” or else it might be “business as usual” thereafter (Robinson 2013, 147-48).

2007 was deemed the U.S. “year of feminism” in art, bridging contemporary art to feminism’s history since the 1960s (Deutsche, D’Souza and Kwon 2008, 33). In

2011, *Doin' It in Public: Feminist and Art at the Woman's Building*, at Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design focused on the “collaborative creative energy and output [that] challenged the prevailing, patriarchal concept of the lone artistic genius” and the importance of the Woman's Building's feminist strategy (Linton 2011, 131).

Recently, institutions have dedicated entire year's programming to featuring women and feminist artists such as [A Year of Yes: Feminism at the Brooklyn Museum](#) in 2017 and *2020 Vision* at [Baltimore Museum of Art](#) in 2020. Public art institutions have exhibited growing interest in working with attention to equality in their collections such as the [Second Museum of Our Wishes Project](#) and the [Museum of Modern Art, New York](#). Coinciding with the recent influx of these high profile exhibitions has been a re-emergence of studies in the U.S. women's movement that give reconsiderations of its history including activists outside of major art centers, the development of innovative and challenging forms and the establishment of new institutions to support and exhibit art by women (Fields 2011, 2). Still, [collections by major American institutions carry a low amount of work by female artists](#). Research on the curation of exhibitions is necessary if we are to hope to change such statistics and history.

### **Feminist Curatorial Approaches**

“Elements of an emerging feminist praxis including reversing abstraction and context stripping; affirming relationship and avowing a biographically real narrator; demystifying the researcher and moving toward parity with the informant; discarding dissociative methods in favor of a feminist praxis of connection; embracing ‘messiness’ and abandoning a monistic linear narrative.” (Long 1999, 118)

I will briefly review a few feminist curatorial philosophies from curators, scholars and artists to contextualize the conversation.

Maura Reilly, author of *Curatorial Activism*, [coined this term](#) to describe:

“organizing art exhibitions with the principal aim of ensuring that large constituencies of people are no longer ghettoized or excluded from the master narratives of art. It is a practice that commits itself to counter-hegemonic initiatives that give voice to those who have been historically silenced and, as such, focuses largely on work produced by women, artists of colour, non-Europeans, and/or queer artists.”

Barbara Pollock’s ideal “virtual feminist museum (VFM)” tracks “relations among artworks outside of the museal categories...so that artworks can speak of something more than either the abstract principles of form and style of the individualism of the creative author.” Her “virtual” is not technological, but philosophical, a feminist way of seeing that has not been realized yet. The VFM is not about definition, but “argued responses, grounded speculations, exploratory relations, that tell us new things about femininity, modernity and representations.” (Pollock 2007, 9-11).

Griselda Pollock’s definition of feminist art: “not a matter of the gender (woman) or political identity (feminist) of its maker, but of *effect*: an artwork is feminist (or not) depending on ‘the way [it] acts upon, makes demands of, and produces positions for its viewers’ and whether ‘it subverts the normal ways in which we view art and usually seduced into a complicity with the meanings of the dominant and oppressive culture.’” Feminist curating presents a “general resistance to the repression of difference through universalisms and universalisations of knowledge (and thus, cultural, social and



political practice)” (Kokoli 2008). Curating can challenge normativity via the display and context.

Curator Maria Lind’s feminist curating:

“How I work as a curator in feminist ways seems to be...questioning existing structures and as most of the time there are quite shaped by patriarchal culture and thinking, this tends to have a certain feminist effect...I do have a commitment to integrating women artists as well as feminist and queer issues into the programming.” (Martinez, Lind and Deepwell 2006, 13)

Prominent feminist artist Judy Chicago’s definition of feminist curating is “providing a context to allow the broadest audience to understand and appreciate the content” (Deskins 2016).

These various feminist curatorial philosophies have commonalities in challenging institutional perspective, integrated traditionally marginalized voices, while reaching a broad audience to further recognize women artists.

### **Work Selection, Assembly and Context:**

Considering the status of women in the arts, presenting the work of women in itself is a feminist act (Martinez and Deepwell 2006, 5-8). Still, *just* the existence of women does not make a space feminist in working towards equality (Tang 2013, 252). Group exhibitions, by the nature of the plurality, demonstrate community, achieving a certain political authority (Kearney 1997, 154). Research and assembly, thus, is a primary factor in feminist curatorial methodology (Deepwell, Lind and Martinez 2006, 5-15).

Feminist curating deals with a selection of work, contextualization and critical arrangement. Even minor variations in layout and text can change the gender politics of exhibitions (Kokoli 2008, 56). Feminist museum workers consciously consider including new voices in the museum's discourses, empowering communities and previously marginalized constituencies to dismantle the structures that originally formed the marginalization and stop the pattern from being repeated (Proctor, 2013, 50).

Robinson examines the impact of curatorial choices on viewer interpretation in major feminist survey exhibitions (Robinson 2003, 130). She notes the differences of scope, timeframe, and inclusivity of men and women artists. Robinson noted that all those surveys similarly intersected with feminist thought, occurred "when the lived experience of the women's movement is turning into the subject of History," and occupied major museums or galleries (Robinson 2003, 131). Being the central art world institutions, these exhibitions thereby define the feminist art movement (Robinson 2003, 132). Robinson acknowledges how an elegant and uplifting display can cause an "unquestioning acceptance" by the viewer and the significance of context and arrangement:

"...Unless s/he has a deep knowledge of an exhibition's subject of enquiry, the visitor will be unlikely to see the gaps and the choices; s/he will certainly not see the stories behind the certain works not being there ... S/he will have the experience of walking around the exhibition, from room to room, and will glean important understandings of the intent of the curator from the way the works are grouped together and placed in relation to each other; s/he will be able to read any labels and wall-mounted texts, pick up leaflets and other material..." (Robinson 2003, 132)

Robinson compares the categorization and written context for *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, 2007) to that of *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang: 45 Years of Art and Feminism* (Bilbao, 2007). She notes *WACK!* took a more contemporary curatorial approach with 18 apolitical, museological categories to organize the exhibition of 119 artists from the USA, such as “Autophotography,” “Making Art History,” and “Pattern and Assemblage,” which was “large, rambling” and unlabeled (Robinson 2003, 134-8). The exhibition catalogue stated that the art wasn’t necessarily feminist, but regarded relationship between the art and feminism.

Contrastingly, *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* gave clear indication of the work being feminist, as were the curatorial strategies. The 69 works from 36 artists, were categorized into political and activist themes “central to feminist thought” thus the curating was “thoroughly informed by knowledge of feminist activism, its foci and the theory it produced” (Robinson 2003, 134-8).

*REBELLE. Art and Feminism 1969-2009* (Museum voor Moderne Kunst Anrnhem, Netherlands, 2009), was organized into five groups encouraging visitors to compare the 87 international artists’ different approaches to representational issues. The exhibition catalog contextualized with an overview, personal history, curatorial process, and five essays written by Dutch authors that acknowledged the importance of feminist art while retaining a locally driven strategy (Robinson 2003, 138-144).

*elles@centrepompidou*, a contemporary survey of 343 women artists from the collection of the Musee national d'art moderne (Paris, 2009) was re-hung twice, providing new perspectives of the work in its own space (Robinson 2003, 143-4).

[Maura Reilly](#) suggests the re-installations “kept the space alive.”

The rehang was a strategy of temporality, an aspect of feminist curating allowing for experimentation challenging the “masculine narrative of museological art history” (Dimitrakaki and Perry 2014, 13). Revolving displays escape routine and keep institutions from becoming a “parking house,” and more so as a continuous transformational space of ideas (Lind 2006, 11-15).

*elles'* catalog language did not situate the exhibition around feminism, rather “to present the public with a hanging that appears to offer a good history of twentieth-century art...to show that representation of women versus men is, ultimately, no longer important.” As much of the work included focused on being female, Robinson concluded that the result was frustrating:

“...Where the frustration lay for a feminist viewer of *elles@centrepompidou* was in the gap between on the one hand the assumption that simply ‘being a woman’ would be sufficient to make a coherent exhibition, and on the other hand the rejection of the category ‘woman’ in favour of the individualism inherent in the feminine plural ‘elles’...the political thinking that could have filled that gap—the deconstruction of the category ‘woman’ and the production of a new forms of representation—was missing. Instead, ‘being a woman’ was at times denied or...was exposed as being an unresolved and unstable category, ready and waiting to undo the museological, archival, approach, but in the context dehistoricised and de-politicised: feminism in limbo.” (Robinson 2003, 146-7).

Malin Hedlin Hayden also stressed the importance of national context in relation to concepts such as “sex” and “gender” in *elles'* theoretical framework (Hayden 2016,

115-171). Denying feminist intent, the all-women exhibit held a paradox (Hayden 2016, 115-171).

Deepwell examined *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth Century Art In, Of, and From the Feminine* (London, 1996), an exhibit of works from the 1940x, 1960s/70s and 1990s hung in relation to the links of art practice, making use of chronological contrast, such as juxtaposing works by Charlotte Salamon (from the 1940s) with those of Nancy Spero (from the 1970s). The exhibition catalogue had a critical or theoretical essay on every artist, each by a different writer; all focused on the significance of the works to the history of art. The exhibition was international, and intended to break the dominant Euro-American agenda in feminist art history. Using the feminine not as the mark of an essential femininity or a means to define women, but as a mark of difference, the exhibit aimed to show the distinct practices of women artists had generated that explored, critiqued, and questioned concepts of the feminine and 'otherness' aesthetically (Deepwell 2005, 73-4).

Deepwell suggests that this exhibit developed a framework that avoided fixed constructs, while conveying meaning and acknowledging women's individuality, avoiding "the other." She contrasts this with exhibitions of collective presentation of women artists by major institutions "which tried to overcome the relegation of women artists to the margins of national art histories." Deepwell critiques this type of framing of exhibitions in that it further promotes a singular model of art history (Deepwell 2005, 74-5).

Robinson asserts the importance of positioning and contextualization of artwork, and recognizing feminism or woman, in an all-woman exhibition. Without it, the exhibitions come off haphazard and can disconnect the artists from history and miss the significance of feminism's transformation of art (Robinson 2003, 147-8).

However, in work selection, inclusion of both overt feminist work and work that isn't considered feminist by the artists, offers audiences ample perspective and opportunity to see feminism's influence (Kokoli 2008, 8-9). These issues should be referred to in exhibition text—regardless of artist intent.

Robinson examined *Picasso to Koons* adjacent to an exhibit of [Sheela-na-gig](#) figures (1995, Irish Museum of Modern Art). Robinson was intrigued by the objects' aesthetic value: "...they enact a representation of female sexuality not found elsewhere in our culture." However, the positioning of the objects akin to *Picasso to Koons*, gave a "confrontational position rather than the subtle or rich dialogue that might have been possible" (Robinson 2003, 18-9). The dichotomy of the exhibition's inherent racist and anti-feminist display via primitive or "other" culture was coupled with the literal encounter of the object as a universal representation of "everywoman." Because of the framing of the exhibition including works by Picasso, Duchamp, Warhol, Beuys and Koons, the transition to the Sheela-na-gigs figures read as "essentialist and retrogressive" with an "opposition between maleness and femaleness" (Robinson 2003, 23).

Coupling ancient and contemporary art forms alongside the work of a woman artist however can alleviate age-old stereotypes that women artists are incapable of “transcending the limitations of their sex and the constraints of their lived experiences in order to make great art...and positioned by critics as shows of ‘women’s art’ unworthy of serious consideration” (Heath 2008 28-9).

While contextualizing in terms of biography affirms male genius, for women, it confirms the stereotypes; thus contextualization is necessary (Heath 2008 28-9). It is a thin line; Kokoli:

“(Auto-) biographism holds particular dangers for the reception of artists who are women, especially when the channels through which audiences encounter their work are not shaped by feminist critique...The prominence of (auto-) biographism in the representation of artists who are women is a symptom of an ongoing dialogue as well as its breakdowns between feminist aesthetic-political thought and mainstream curatorial practice.” (Kokoli 2013, 2)

The balance of reaching an audience for recognition, coupled with presenting a critical feminist exhibition is challenging; acknowledging this conversation can help.

Heath examines *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti* (Whitechapel Gallery, 1982), which provided three frameworks for each piece (Gardner-Huggett 2012, 31). The exhibition text acknowledged the show as “consciously shaped by feminist theory...designed to raise a series of ideas and arguments that are relevant to questions about women’s art and feminist aesthetics” (Heath 2008, 32). The display did not emphasize autonomy, nor create simple comparisons between the artists, but “created a dialogical space which ensured that neither could become a representative “‘woman artist’” via four themes: “women, art and politics,” “revolution and

renaissance,” “the interior and exterior” and “the discourse of the body” (Heath 2008, 31-2).

Similarly, [\*Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth Century Art In, Of, and From the Feminine\*](#) (Boston 1996) included work by 37 twentieth century women artists from Europe and the Americas from each decade throughout the century. Each artist was coupled with an essay by a different writer, focusing on the significance to art history. Through multiple perspectives and aesthetic strategies, the framework avoided artificial constructs, negotiating the tension in acknowledging each woman's individuality without establishing “women’s art” (Deepwell 2005, 73-4). This exhibition’s curatorial practice was “informed by explicitly feminist attention to the effects of cultural, racial and sexual difference to enrich and transform our understanding of the contribution made by artists who are women...” (Heath 1996, 26). The assembly and context of the exhibition were primary factors of feminist curation (Heath 1996, 34).

Assembly can also relate to issues instead of themes “...where they are mobile and relate to one another along with various sections—and how the works themselves ‘perform’ the ideas, attitudes, emotions, etc” (Deepwell, Lind and Martinez 2006, 15). Considering the environment, time and context of the exhibition setting is also relevant, “discovering and tracing secrets or new connections among the works” (Deepwell, Lind and Martinez 2006, 7).



Similarly, Maura Reilly formed the idea for [\*Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art\*](#), presenting an array of mid-career women artists born after 1960 from different cultures whose work manifested their sociocultural, political, economic, racial, gender or sexual identities:

“...it also challenges the monocultural, so-called First World feminism that assumes ‘sameness’ among women. It hoped thereby to help open up a more flexible, less restrictive space for feminism as a worldwide activist project.” (Reilly 2010, 156-7)

Reilly, with co-curator Linda Nochlin, used theoretical feminist framework to outline the intentionally “loose” categories: Life Cycles, Identities, Politics and Emotions. They took international trips, studio visits, and research to invite artists. Though the conceptual framework was not discussed in the exhibition, it was detailed in the catalog which gave a “broad overview of transnational feminisms” (Reilly 2010, 158-170).

The research and curating with intersectional intent was emphasized:

“It is only through the understanding of our ‘common differences’ as we have visually emphasized through the careful placement of diverse cross-cultural works in the exhibition, that solidarity is achieved. In the end, *Global Feminisms* hopes to have contributed productively to this end and other dialogues about racism, sexism, and Euro-America-centricism in contemporary art.” (Reilly 2010, 172)

Siona Wilson found *Global Feminisms*’ inclusion of artists from “all the inhabited continents of the world” as “check-the-box bureaucratic feel” reinstating that context is crucial (Wilson 2008, 326-7). However, [\*the exhibition was not intended to be comprehensive\*](#), and encouraged subsequent venues to install the works with different themes to provoke new conversations.

Curator Bojana Pejic refers to doing extensive research selecting work for the exhibition [\*After the Wall\*](#):

“As for the feminist curatorial ‘hand’, here is an example...I was not looking for women artists. Rather, I was after artworks which could help us understand the ‘dialects of normality’ in the freshly established, Eastern European democracies...The issue is not to make feminist exhibitions but to make exhibitions in a feminist way.” (Kivimaa and Pejic 2013, 175)

Exhibitions of all women are useful when “women artists’ genealogies are still in progress ...even if they risk being branded essentialist ‘separatist’” (Kivimaa and Pejic 2013, 180).

Examinations by other art historians about curating explore contextual issues of intersectionality, exhibition didactics, and visual arrangement. Every exhibit exudes a way of seeing the world which contains assumptions that affect social and cultural relations; what is “central to critical multiculturalism is naming and challenging racism and injustice, not just recognizing and celebrating differences and reducing prejudices” (Acuff and Evans 2014, xxviii). Exhibition text must not assume audience experience or knowledge, as this can lead to “the other.” Text should avoid generalization and oversimplification and use rich, specific contextual information. Language should be consistent and visitors encouraged to consider the complexity and fluidity of various cultures via definitions and implications of dominant and non-dominant cultures (Goins 2014, 256). Environmental context should be considered as meanings can change depending on location (Skrubbe 2016, xvii).

Susan Platt emphasized the significance in providing a deep context in her review of *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*: “...the whole enterprise seems

mainly narcissistic and self indulgent unless the social context is emphasized” (Platt 2008, 42). Further, the exhibition “is still circumscribed by the elite, but claustrophobic, perspectives of the north-east United States, by the depoliticized modern art traditions of the United States, and the definition of feminism as embedded in the female body isolated from social context” (Platt 2008, 42). Curators need to go deeper to develop a formula for transforming the world outside the Museum, otherwise, “it is simply mannerism” (Platt 2008, 42).

[Members of the feminist collective LEVEL](#) include in their feminist curatorial mission to select issues that have impact outside the exhibition—politically, socially, environmentally, etc. This aspect of feminist curating is a clear intention beyond the art itself.

Helen Molesworth suggests a feminist way of organizing work non-chronologically, rather through alliance, which permits them to “‘talk to each other’ about what does matter in our struggle for cultural expression” (Molesworth 2010, 508). Contextualizing with a history including the challenges of feminism suggests forged connections over different spaces and times, building deeper understanding and recognition, and breaking out of the “white cube” curatorial norm (Deepwell and Lind 2006, 12).

Barbara Pollock’s “virtual feminist museum (VFM) also employs a conversational approach, seeing the museum as “research laboratory” that rather than provide solid answers, “counters heroic, nationalist and formalist art history to discover other

meanings by daring to plot networks and transformative interactions between the images differently assembled in conversations framed by feminist analysis and theory” (Pollock 2007, 11). The impact of the archive as “pre-selected in ways that reflect what each culture considered worth storing and remembering, skewing the historical record and indeed historical writing towards the privileged, the powerful, the political, military and religious...overdetermined by facts of class, race, gender, sexuality and above all power.” In response to this distorted view of history, Pollock re-imagines museums and exhibitions as emphasizing critical relations among artworks, and relations between viewers and artworks “that points to repressed narratives in the histories of art, and continues...the feminist project of differencing the canon.” The reassembling would lead to a feminist future (Pollock 2007, 13-14).

Dimitrakaki and Perry reference the critical arrangement of Amelia Jones’ *Sexual Politics* organized in nine sections as clarifying relationships between works of art, demonstrating a horizontal—as opposed to vertical—art historical paradigm. The authors refer to De Zegher’s exhibition *Inside the Visible*, as an example of investigating “recurrent cycles, rather than a linear survey” to structure the exhibition. This feminist curatorial aspect is in contradiction to typical museological narrative (Dimitrakaki and Perry 2014, 13-4).

Griselda Pollock proposes something even further away from the mainstream, emphasizing the importance of the encounter rather than the subject or object. Nancy Proctor describes Pollock’s idea as “an opportunity for museum technologists to conceive new kinds of encounters, relationships, readings, interactions and

conversations framed by feminist analysis and theory...” (Pollock 207, 15). This feminist curatorial aspect doesn’t exhibit as a means of fetishizing or memorializing, but rather through encounter, encourages us to touch, share and co-emerge with unknown others and pasts (Proctor 2013, 61).

### **1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Wave Feminism in Context**

It is important to acknowledge feminist precedents in exhibition text. For example, an exhibition of video artwork by women should acknowledge feminism, as the use of new media are “modes of the feminist avante garde” (Deepwell 2005, 78). Omitting this critical context leaves the work disconnected to their feminist artistic precedents (Wilson 2008, 324-330). As feminist innovations become embedded in contemporary perspectives, their role is in danger of being erased (Brodsky and Olin 2008, 330-1). [Utilizing feminist history as a source of inspiration and context](#) is a feminist curatorial aspect.

[LEVEL feminist art collective members mention the inference to feminism’s past in their discussion](#) of curatorial methods. Critiquing contemporary discussions of collaborative curating as having “blatant disregard for collective and effective methods of feminist groups” of the second wave generation. Feminist groups have been using collective methods for decades; LEVEL reclaims collaborative curating as an explicitly feminist method.

The understanding of the term “feminist” as relating to ideas in the 1960s-1970s, plays a role in the cyclical pattern of feminist exhibitions. Potentially using this word

then can create an assumption of passe, fear or hostility, making it necessary to contextualize (Malvern 2013, 117).

Malin Hedlin Hayden examined [\*elles@centrepompidou: Women artists in the collection of the Musee national d'art modern\*](#), an all-women exhibition which claimed it did not deal with feminism. Going so far as to state that gender representation is no longer important, Hayden found the issues still apparent in the context of the exhibition. Ironically, the canon of art history wasn't challenged or altered, but told with different objects. Not discussing the reasoning and denying the feminist intent only works to rewrite history temporarily (Hayden 2016, 124).

Though these approaches are not agreeable to all feminists, they are significant aspects for consideration.

### **Networking & Collaborating: inside and outside the Museum**

Another feminist curatorial strategy uses networking as an alternative to the curator as director. Curator Bojana Pejic's [\*Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe\*](#) (2010), was informed through a transnational curatorial collaboration across departments and outside the museum (Kivimaa 2013, 173-83). Twenty-four art critics, historians and artists researched their national art histories and proposed artworks and textual sources:

“When you curate, you actually perform an un-democratic act: you make certain professional decisions (as the researchers themselves made), you include and exclude, and you do this to arrive at a more or less consistent narrative...Each exhibition project requires a level of openness and is a process of learning and unlearning” (Kivimaa 2013, 173-83).

*Gender Check* brought together professionals who might not have worked together otherwise, initiating new networks for future projects. Conversations across departments, and outside the museum help embrace cultural autonomy in exhibitions (Viera and Villeneuve 2014, 93). [LEVEL feminist art collective members point to collaboration and collectivity](#) as key to feminist curating via evolving group discussions, community workshops, educational programs and performances. They intentionally invite artists already working with communities as an act of inclusivity.

The exhibition at the [Curating Feminist conference by Contemporary Art and Feminism](#), was curated with a collaborative feminist methodology:

“‘Curating Feminism’ addresses ideas around the ethics of collaboration between artist and curator to facilitate the logistics of the laboratory-style approach...as a deliberate strategy to decentralize the curatorial process. It includes a long installation period to give the curators and artists the rare chance to work in the galleries as a process space, and to explore ideas of activism/feminism in the making/curatorial process as much as in the finished work.”

[Curator Kelly Doley](#), who worked on the exhibition, recalled the challenging but strong feminist curatorial methodology, being consciously diverse, multi-voiced, reconnecting to its feminist past, with alternative perspectives side by side, which, established nonhierarchical relations that are typically “at a safe distance” of control between curator-artist, and artist-viewer.

In Berlin, curator [Tina Sauerlander](#) founded *peer-to-space*, a platform for artistic exchange, and *Saloon*, “a network of women working in Berlin’s art scene as artists, curators, gallerists and journalists” in order to counter the fact that she receives several portfolio submissions by men, not women. She notes that artists think more about

feminism when they are trying to get their work shown because the continuing struggle for visibility and accessibility curators need to recognize, and networks like her organization can help alleviate this.

Exhibition impact lies as much in its process, as it is the work of many. A key aspect to feminist organization is collaboration (Proctor 2013, 49). In curating solo, documentation and advice of others guide the process. In a team of curators, there are diverse sources of information, with the challenge of defending beliefs.

### **Accessibility, Interactivity**

“Feminism offers tools and means for both understanding and enacting the often contradictory tactics required by a truly radical and transformative museum practice” (Proctor 2013, 48)

Museums are using new media to connect with visitors, offering new ways of encountering collections. Instead of only innovating for innovation’s sake or ignoring technological change, feminist technological strategies can radically restructure and even leverage museum sustainability (Proctor 2013, 48). Through blogs, social media and participatory programming, museums can become more open community spaces.

Technological visual culture is making it easier to find and see art immediately online. Some museums call to online ‘citizen curators,’ using mobile application games and more. These ‘new’ participatory methods are a legacy of feminist and other social movements seeking to give voice to those usually silenced. Feminism specifically offers a way to comprehend the restructuring of the museum in this age of social media, referring back to Pollock’s idea of the virtual feminist museum. Feminism can



help this contemporary transformation of the museum to a space of encounter, bringing previously silenced artists to the conversation, and avoiding just a museum of technology (Proctor 2013, 49-51).

More than broadcasting with superficial engagements, developing new compelling ways to connect with communities and individuals in a more flexible, modular structure enhances the museum with alliance from multiple voices. This echoes aspects of feminist curating by discussing collections and curating of exhibitions using participatory systems like crowd-sourcing. Networked communications bring about new kinds of participation for the museum in a more civic space, benefiting more than just a self-selected museum community.

Nancy Proctor developed an articulation of this vision for The Smithsonian via three apps: *Smithsonian Mobile*, which invites “visitors to collaborate in the development of a dynamic, evolving guide to visiting the Smithsonian;” *Stories on Main Street*, which invites visitors to “share and add oral histories about life in small town American to the Institution’s collections”; and *Access American Stories*, “crowd-sourced verbal descriptions of exhibits and objects to enhance the experience of visually-impaired visitors and others” (Proctor 2013, 54-6). Online databases can also give a wider, more inclusive presence and ability for participation and learning about the collections and artists than the “traditional, masculinist imperialistic” museum structure of the buildings themselves (Sandell 2014).

[Members of LEVEL, the Australian feminist art collective, expressed their commitment to](#) community engagement when organizing exhibitions; the “look” of their exhibitions are secondary to the mission. They intentionally invite community-focused individuals to work with them, focusing on educational programming and digital resources so viewers can interact in an open and accessible atmosphere. They stress the importance of the “impact beyond the exhibit.”

A feminist perspective sees curators’ role with the public as one to share information with. When listening and nourishing communities via museums with participation and networking, expertise or authority should not be forgotten or devalued. These aspects work together— the more user-generated content available, the more people look for museums and trusted art experts to guide them. Perhaps a feminist curatorial thinking would go from “we do the talking” to “we help you do the talking” (Proctor 2013, 62).

### **Architecture and Space**

The design of a building affects interpretation. Nancy Proctor looks at the [Robert and Arlene Kogod Courtyard](#) with its contemporary web-like roof “in stark contrast to the impregnable neo-classical façade of the building” as an example emulating the institution’s complex roles:

“It both sustains the museum as authority, and extends the museum’s structure to incorporate new roles, activities, faces and community voices. Its image evokes the complex, multifaceted nature of the museum discourse and the challenges for museum professionals who must negotiate often opposing and always shifting roles for themselves, their audiences and their funders” (Proctor 2013, 52).

Some feminists intentionally work outside of the mainstream museum, such as the [LEVEL feminist art collective](#), who use the “ambiguity of the space” as another curatorial layer.

Architecture is oftentimes a privileged challenge with funding and accessibility, one aspect most often curators do not have control over. This feminist curatorial aspect is worthy of deeper discussion.

### **Challenges to Feminist Curating**

“A principal challenge of the feminist project in art history is to simultaneously campaign for women artists and other erased voices to be included in the museum and the art history canons, even as it interrogates and undermines the very structure and power of the canon itself.” (Proctor 2013, 51)

Challenges in curating with feminist intent reflect the complexity of having a feminist practice in contexts which might not have feminism at the core of its mission. As Joanne Heath points out, “the institutional structure of the art world has served to marginalize artists who are women” (Heath 2008, 20). For example, The Guerilla Girls are in “the paradoxical position of being embraced by the very institutions that they have so consistently critiqued” (Heath 2008, 21).

The issue of divisive museum work culture - from marketing education, administration - make it difficult to create coherently feminist offerings (Dimitrakaki and Perry 2014, 4-6). Moreover, art establishments tend to show insecurity for accommodating women artists by leaving issues out; the desire to present the work according to established conventions and viewing the work as the ‘woman artist’ (Heath 2008, 36-7). The issue of museum professionals operating under “increasingly

commercial constraints” suggests that many have adopted an “overly populist approach to exhibition-making and have by and large proved hesitant to embrace the critical questions posed by the revisionist art history that has so transformed the discipline within its university setting” (Heath 2008, 36).

There have been advances in exhibiting all-women and/or feminist exhibitions in notable mainstream museums, though there is still an overlay of discriminatory curatorial practice (Heath 2008, 36). [Kim and Mackrandilal lament this in their negative critique of the 2014 The Whitney Biennial](#), and Griselda Pollock called the exhibits “largely tokenistic” (Kokoli 2008, 15). Ruth Iskin, too, points out the fact that these temporary exhibitions featuring “others” typically are passing events that do not change the permanent collections - or “the” story of art, thus reinstating the others as others (Iskin 2016, 31).

As ever, there is a battle for ideas in terms of curating the work of women artists. Deepwell: “The tension continues for many (Feminist) curators between the need for specialism...and the attempt to dissolve distinctions altogether with the aim of ‘normalizing’ the situation” (Deepwell 2005, 80). Instead of (or in addition to) only demanding greater wall space for women and deconstructing greatness, “the exposition of power...[is] not to normalize existing forms of symbolic power in the art world, but to hijack them into more prickly proximity with the critique of institutions” (Tang 2013, 251).

“Feminist practice within an evolving history of curating and exhibition strategies has often been rendered invisible by the incorporation of the specific practices of feminist artists and curators into generic (performance art) or personal (Lucy Lippard) achievements, rather than as aspects of an evolving and contested feminist practice” (Dimitrakaki and Perry 2014, 11). It is important to outline a clear and intentionally feminist methodology in order to not lose curatorial history.

The fields of art history and curatorship are in transition (Iskin 2016, 44). The canon is concurrently being destabilized via specialized temporary exhibitions and new scholarly directions such as this, and persists via permanent collections and survey art history books. To become fully diversified canons - or pluriversal canons as Iskin deems, canons require more experimentation--artistically, scholarly and curatorially (Iskin 2016, 45). The methods discussed in this article were formulated from research of scholarship on feminist and all-women exhibitions, suggesting considerations for curating exhibitions in a way to potentially provoke change inside and outside the gallery, aiming for the long term impact of underrepresented artists becoming heard, seen, and recognized.

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